



The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations

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When The Culture of Narcissism was first published, it was clear that Christopher Lasch had identified something important: what was happening to American society in the wake of the decline of the family over the last century.

The book quickly became a bestseller. This edition includes a new afterword, "The Culture of Narcissism Revisited."

The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations Details

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From Reader Review The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations for online ebook

Steve Stein says

Now this is fun. Published in 1979, this is a classic "curmudgeon book". Lasch excoriates everything about modern life in an innovative way, combining a conservative respect for traditional life and morality with Freudian and to a lesser extent Marxist perspectives.

The main argument: we are all narcissists. We have deep issues with self-esteem, are consumed with appearance instead of character, and are constantly in need of approval. Due to the demands of business, people are alienated from their labor, and work in gigantic bureaucracies where appearance is valued more than good work. Due to the centralization of the state and disintegration of traditional family and community structures, people's expertise in running their own lives is being eliminated. Where once people felt confident about their ability to cook, raise families, and do productive work, there is deep uncertainty, despair, and an over-reliance on "experts". As a result, we grasp onto charisma and bathe in the glow of those rare folks who seem to have an irrational confidence, even if they are psychopaths or hustlers.

I find these arguments very persuasive and very much in evidence now in 2011. Celebrity culture, undoubtedly much less a part of American life in 1979, has grown tremendously. Reality TV, the increasing profusion of prideful ignorance in the face of the biggest information glut in history, and the increasing feeling of hopelessness in the battle of the sexes are all prophesied.

This book is conservative but not at all libertarian--in fact, it criticizes Van Mises's belief that problems of bureaucracy enter modern life solely because of statist intervention. Its approximate political labels (paleo-conservative communitarianism?) don't quite do it justice. The book noticeably doesn't cover religion, and it seems that Lasch respects tradition as a stabilizing, human force more than a set of particular (i.e., Christian) set of values. This remains refreshingly unconventional wisdom. Read it.

Brandy says

It's rare that I find myself simultaneously in such deep agreement and disagreement with an author. How I wish Lasch had been writing today; I would love to read his takes on our current leadership and bizarre cults of personality. His insights into public egos are many, and he has a certain approach to discussions of politics and social capital which I enjoy deeply. But there is also a strange thread of nostalgia for some "golden age" of the past at times that strikes me as both odd and out of place. It's an odd blend, neo-Marxism, Freudianism, and social conservatism.

Let's start with the easy targets--the dislikes. I had been sharing passages on social media every couple of days as I read the first few chapters. Early on, he throws out some frighteningly prescient passages like

Success in our society had to be ratified by publicity. The tycoon who lives in personal obscurity, the empire builder who controls the destinies of nations from behind the scenes, are vanishing types. Even nonelective officials, ostensibly preoccupied with questions of high policy, have to keep themselves constantly on view; all politics becomes a form of spectacle.

Then, deep in the middle of Chapter IV, he begins to discuss art and the theater of the absurd. He takes a oddly reactionary approach to this, with claims about how the destruction of the "fourth wall" in theatre productions leads to a despair in those who view it. He spends some time talking about the necessity of

“illusions of reality” in art as a means of providing order and engagement in its audience, and bemoaning the techniques of what I would consider postmodern art, specifically the techniques of dropping the veil between the creator and the audience (think, on the most popular level, Vonnegut, but Lasch speaks of many of the major Western authors of his time). In Lasch’s worldview, “When art, religion, and finally even sex lose their power to provide an imaginative release from everyday reality, the banality of pseudo-self-awareness becomes so overwhelming that men finally lose the capacity to envision any release at all except in total nothingness.”

I see where he’s going. I do. But I don’t think that a return to the structured world of pre-20th century artistic perspectives is either realistic or useful at this point. Not the moralizing, not the clear social lessons, not the sense of surety about the world around us. Because that surety is lost, and that surety is exactly what Lasch longs for—some sort of external truth that holds significance beyond our personal experience and hedonistic urges. Of course. I know few people who don’t long for that: something real with deep roots that extend beyond the surface of our experience. I would just argue that this is a simplistic way of looking at the function of art, which seems in this case to be best described as chronicling the place where people find themselves, exploring that, and trying to draw what meaning we can from it. It’s not a matter of looking backward, but of looking deeply inward. In any case, I feel I need to acknowledge here how his take on art is interlocked with his take on the superficiality of engagement in the public world. I agree with him that we have moved to a place where everything is valued only as a reflection of ourselves, and that we do so on a surface level without full acknowledgement or understanding of the deeper societal connections so important to our health and survival. I just don’t believe a reactionary stance to new forms of art is the way to address this, and I think that ultimately that stance is loaded with issues of class and elitism.

But the discussion of art is another writing, a longer argument that I don’t have the time to enter here. In regards to this book, the other major area I had problems with was his entire chapter on sports, which again held a certain nostalgia for a golden age before sports were professionalized and when they added something substantial to civic pride, by being true competitions of excellence and not watered down by ubiquitous participation. Again, he is using this example to elaborate on how so much of how we choose to spend our time is designed to soothe our egos (and our underlying senses of emptiness and lack of purpose) rather than to bolster our connections with others. Again, I agree with the underlying ideas, but find the examples he chooses to explore problematic and his approaches a bit one-sided.

In the third area of deep reservation about his argumentative approach, I have a strong reaction to some of the comments he makes about the decline of the family and the implied need for a return to traditional roles, though if I were to begin engaging with that here, you would never be free of me. I have to take the lazy/busy exemption on this one and leave it at saying, while I take to heart his points about institutionalizing the former roles of parents and families, I have deep issues with his approach to the problem and his retroactive overtones. I haven’t read anything else by Lasch, though, and don’t know if he explored the issues of marriage, feminism, etc, further elsewhere as second wave feminism transformed into something totally different a few years after this book was published.

Even with all of these challenging passages, though, I find the vast majority of the book to be vastly compelling in the Age of Trump. Where we find ourselves now, during this era of celebrity masking itself as leadership, gossip substituting for success, and soundbites an acceptable alternative to thoughtful analysis, is exactly the reality Lasch feared when he wrote

The perception of the world as a dangerous and forbidding place, though it originates in a realistic awareness of the insecurity of contemporary social life, receives reinforcement from the narcissistic projection of aggressive impulses outward. The belief that society has no future, while it rests on a certain realism about the dangers ahead, also incorporates a narcissistic inability to identify with posterity or to feel oneself part of a historical stream.

Lasch spends some time looking at this modern narcissism through both the original Freudian lens and how it has become fetishized by the pop-psych worlds of self-help and (therapy) couch hopping. In 1979, when this book was first published, everything was focused on personal growth, according to Lasch's view, yet this growth was strangely encapsulated in childish, stunted emotional needs for validation and approval with little substantive effort exerted to gain the same. He sees this in some ways as a crisis of modern life, where we are divorced from the deeper interconnections of our communities while encouraged to believe there are no limits to what we can achieve. This, to Lasch, is a recipe for a self-feeding cycle of detachment and despair.

If we are focused on our survival from moment to moment—and for now, I'm talking about emotional and psychological survival—we cannot look too far ahead or too far backward. Our connections to others are severed, because we cannot afford the risk of diverting our energies away from those necessary to keeping our heads above water. The superficial becomes standard; every interaction becomes measured by how it personally affects us. Without our former connections to community, we become hedonists with little direction as a society—ok; I can buy that. Further, Lasch returns to the Freudian core of his argument, and says we have through all of this paused on our own necessary journeys of emotional growth:

The best hope of emotional maturity, then, appears to lie in a recognition of our need for dependence on people who nevertheless remain separate from ourselves and refuse to submit to our whims. It lies in a recognition of others not as projections of our own desires but as independent beings with desires of their own. More broadly, it lies in acceptance of our limits. The world does not exist merely to satisfy our own desires; it is a world in which we can find pleasure and meaning, once we understand that others too have a right to these goods. Psychoanalysis confirms the ancient religious insight that the only way to achieve happiness is to accept limitations in a spirit of gratitude instead of attempting to annul those limitations or bitterly resenting them.

Emotional maturity? Interdependence? Gratitude? What concepts those are.

Alex Stroshine says

Christopher Lasch unleashes a brisk polemic against the proliferation of narcissism in American culture. Lasch examines how pathological narcissism has affected labour, sport, sex and especially the family (no wonder he was so admired by conservative Christians; although not a believer himself, his analysis of the foibles of liberal permissiveness are exceptional). Although virtually all the individuals Lasch mentions and engages with have passed from the limelight, the tendencies and ideologies they held to are still alive. Lasch died before the Internet Age but it would be interesting to see what his critiques would have been about the World Wide Web - what is more narcissistic than selfies and likes (but plz like this review!!!!!!!!!!). This is a popular work and while good, I think it often drifts into generalization and as another reviewer remarked, much too indebted to Freudian theory.

Bettie? says

Description from Robert Reich:

In 1979, when 33-year-old Donald Trump was building Trump Tower -- his first big narcissistic project -- sociologist Christopher Lasch published "The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations."

In his book, Lasch argued that a host of economic factors, especially rampant consumerism, had made people self-obsessed, hyper-competitive, cut off from reality, erratic, unempathetic, angry, and vindictive. As a result, he wrote, “truth has given way to credibility, facts to statements that sound authoritative without conveying any authoritative information.” Lasch cited the example of Nixon’s press secretary, Ron Ziegler, who at one point “admitted that his previous statements on Watergate had become ‘inoperative.’”

The narcissistic personality, Lasch wrote, will “display... the prevailing obsession with celebrity and a determination to achieve it even at the cost of rational self-interest and personal safety. The narcissist divides society into two groups: the rich, great, and famous on the one hand, and the common herd on the other. ... [Narcissists] worship heroes only to turn against them when their heroes disappoint them. ... The narcissist admires and identifies himself with ‘winners’ out of his fear of being labeled a loser. ... his admiration often turns to hatred if the object of his attachment does something to remind him of his own insignificance.”

For Lasch, a person possessing such traits was unable to function as a rational or trustworthy member of society -- as a human being capable of kindness, empathy and attentiveness to others people’s reality.

37 years later, Trump was elected president.

What do you think?

Szplug says

I read this book and thought *This is a good book.*

I read this book and thought *I've learned from this book.*

I read this book and thought *Kit Lasch is the bomb.*

I read this book and thought *Man can be as slippery as Saturday's soap.*

I read this book and thought *Man can be as silly as Bugsy Malone.*

I read this book and thought *This is a serious book, with serious thoughts, and serious insights, and here I am chewing gum and popping bubbles.*

I read this book and thought *I really like this book. It's aces.*

I read this book and thought *This book mirrors a society a mile wide and an inch deep.*

I read this book and thought *My mirror shows splintered eyes haunted by failure.*

I read this book and thought *This looks to be another let's see year for the Nucks.*

I read this book and thought *Thanks to ————, I haven't had a decent dump in six goddamn years.*

I read this book and thought *Man is like me, severely constipated.*

I read this book and thought *And when it comes out, it's hard and it hurts.*

I read this book and thought *Why can't I accept finitude?*

I read this book and thought *Ol' Kit fucking nailed it. He fucking nailed me.*

I read this book and thought *Why does everybody talk about me?*

I read this book and thought *And if they aren't, why?*

I read this book and thought *Are my lungs expelling septic stink?*

I read this book and thought *We've seen better days.*

I read this book and thought *Better days can still be had.*
I read this book and thought *Salad days and tart vinaigrette.*
I read this book and thought *My daddy didn't cry, so neither do I.*
I read this book and thought *Not even when he beat me.*
I read this book and thought *I'm lying, he never actually beat me.*
I read this book and thought *But if I was hypnotized, I might think that he did.*
I read this book and thought *I've read most of Kit Lasch's books. They are smart but gloomy, tempestuous like my stomach.*
I read this book and thought *My stomach after Harvey's at the airport.*
I read this book and thought *I loved this book. Does the book love me?*
I read this book and thought *Good stuff, Kit. Merci beaucoup.*
I read this book and thought *In Vancouver the sun can hide itself away for months on end.*
I read this book and thought *Despite this, the suicide rate in Vancouver hovers around the national mean.*
I read this book and thought *I haven't yet erased my map.*
I read this book and thought *I once saw a woman jump to her death.*
I read this book and thought *Cracked me inside like a beat-up eggshell.*
I read this book and thought *To a chicken, an eggbeater is a rooster accused of child abuse.*
I read this book and thought *With that and Woody Woodpuckle, I'm always armed.*
I read this book and thought *But I've got lots and lots of books to go.*
I read this book and thought *This is a solid four stars.*
I read this book and thought *Everybody should read this book.*
I read this book and thought *I did.*

John David says

Christopher Lasch's "The Culture of Narcissism" was originally published in 1979, and has been a major cynosure of cultural and social criticism ever since. English literary critic Frank Kermode called it, not inaccurately, a "hellfire sermon." It is a wholesale indictment of contemporary American culture. It also happens to fall into a group of other books which share the same body of concerns that I have been working my way through, or around, in recent months: Daniel Boorstin's "The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America," Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle," Philip Rieff's entire corpus (especially "Charisma," but also his earlier work on Freud), and even the book I'm currently reading, Tony Judt's "Ill Fares the Land."

All of these books discuss some aspect of social anomie, loss of community, and subsequent feelings of dissolution. This isn't by any means a new debate; in the field of sociology, it dates at least as far back as Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, a distinction that was almost a prerequisite for the invention of modernism.

First, a note on the word "narcissism." It was formerly a clinical term to diagnose the individual, but has "gone global" - or at least national. Lasch doesn't really mean for the term to be a diagnosis in the clinical sense, but rather a "metaphor for the human condition" in contemporary times. In his argot, the word means much more than just lack of empathy, a tendency toward manipulative actions and pretentious behavior. "People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security" (p. 7). Lasch is more interested in the dissolution of communities and relationships that makes us feel as if we live highly individualized, atomized lives detached from the concerns of others. The book spells out the ways in which these patterns are positively correlated with the rise of materialism, technologism, "personal liberation" (those bywords of sixties radicalism) and nominal egalitarianism.

His few words on contemporary corporate America will strike anyone who has ever worked in one of these organizational hellscape: he states that corporate bureaucracies “put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem.”

A la Debord, the politics of narcissism become more about “managing impressions” and “human relations” more than actually solving problems, citing Kennedy’s disaster at the Bay of Pigs as an example. To steal from the language of yet another late French thinker, it’s all about the simulacra. In a chapter called “The Degradation of Sport,” he notes that enormous amounts of corporate money have turned athletes into mere entertainers to be sold to the most prestigious sports syndicate. The central concept of the sporting even – the agon, the contest – has been displaced in order to sell products and personalities who will invariably be with the team for only a short time.

Lasch’s political affiliations are sometimes interestingly and tellingly misconstrued. Though often criticized for being a reactionary conservative simply because he points to the radicalism of the sixties as one of the desiderata under consideration, Lasch’s analysis is self-consciously informed by both Marx and Freud, two figures hardly recognized for being popularly co-opted by various brands of twentieth-century conservatism. Those who believe that Lasch is a blind ideologue on other side of the spectrum need to read him again: he explicitly faults both the right for their veneration of the market’s “invisible hand” and the left for their cultural progressivism. Lasch is in politics, above all else, a democratic humanist.

He writes in the Afterword, “The best defenses against the terrors of existence are the homely comforts of love, work, and family life, which connect us to a world that is independent of our wishes yet responsive to our needs. It is through love and work, as Freud noted ... that we exchange crippling emotional conflict for ordinary unhappiness.” It might not sound like a prognosis abounding in optimism, but it drips with the sincerity of an honest, heartfelt critic of American culture.

Justin Evans says

Lasch, on the evidence of this book, is the American Adorno. He writes in a similar style; each sentence is perfectly formed, but often not so well connected to the preceding and following sentences. He has no patience for the conservative/progressive distinction, and would rather discuss the effects of an idea or practice rather than immediately laud or damn it (so, for instance, 'feminism' isn't abruptly praised or scornfully ignored; rather, the difficulties of putting feminist doctrine into effect, and the inadequacy of feminism as a theory of society, are outlined... without concluding that women are inferior to men). Finally, this is Major Theory. He is not 'making a space for conversation' or 'analyzing discourses' or adding one brick to the great Academic Wall. He has a theory that late twentieth century life is really messed up, he traces out how we got to be like we are and speculates about how we could stop being that way. And his theory does seem to explain an awful lot.

In short, the conjunction of progressive liberalism and capitalism destroys traditional forms of life without providing any satisfactory replacement. Since people can no longer rely on those traditional forms, we feel a) at a loss, homeless, as if the world is out to crush us, but also, b) we're completely and increasingly dependent on the world. Our psychological defense against this is to become 'narcissistic,' reliant upon others for praise to boost our self-esteem. That praise needn't be genuine, in fact, it's usually better if it's not, since then there's no danger of our becoming dependent upon anyone. Relationships seem to require co-dependence, rather than friendship or love. It's increasingly difficult for us to become mature adults. Nonetheless, Lasch doesn't seem to be advocating a return to feudalism or anything. Socialism - not bureaucracy, but the human control of the economy, state and society - is his chosen solution to these

problems.

The big problem with the book is that it's all a little Freudy. If you're allergic to Freud, as many people seem to be, you'll find that pretty off-putting. But there's not a whole lot of the really whacky Oedipus stuff. Lasch relies on the later Freud's theory of the id/ego/super-ego, to suggest that the revolt against authority makes it impossible for us to form an effective ego. Instead, it's all id (uncontrolled instinct) and terrifying super-ego (crushing guilt and self-loathing). You can and should cherry-pick chapters, even if you don't like Freud.

The second problem is that this is not a book for people who don't know about sociology and psychology as traditions of thought. In that way he's like Adorno too- this isn't popular non-fiction, whatever else it is. How it became a best-seller I'll never know. I do think that someone who's done a good job with a core undergraduate education should be able to muddle through and get the point; but how many people have done that? This is frustrating, because I want to recommend it to everyone I know. And if I do that, half of my friends will think I've become a knee-jerk conservative, one quarter will say 'oh Justin, up to his commie tricks again,' and the other quarter will roll their eyes and wish I wasn't such an elitist. Well suck it up, friends- I'm a conservative, socialist, elitist. Maybe I just like this book because I already agreed with it.

Beatrix says

This is what I live in. (Even if I don't live in the US.) (Or perhaps this is what we all live in, but I'd rather just speak for myself.)

And this is an excellent book.

I've got this theory that the best non-fiction books are the ones that don't tell me anything I don't already know, but they are great because they can *explain* what I already know and what I experience everyday, while I can't do this. I can only express my dissatisfaction and the constant feeling of "what the hell is going on?" in a series of less-than-well-articulated whines. And it seems to me that it's better to have some explanations than just to whine mindlessly.

(I came up with this nice little theory the moment I finished the book, and I haven't elaborated on it ever since. But anyway, the fact remains: this is an excellent, enlightening work of non-fiction.)

Murtaza says

I was surprisingly a little underwhelmed by this book, not because its insights and criticisms didn't ring true but rather because they all seemed quite familiar already. This could probably be attributable to the fact that it was written several decades ago and the arguments have already been internalized by the broader culture (even if changes haven't really been effectuated). After reading Patrick Deneen's "Why Liberalism Failed," this book seemed like a more granular retread of some of the points of that work.

Having said that I did really appreciate Lasch's class-based analyses, particularly his scathing depiction of modern society as an individualistic "war of all against all." This hyper-competitive and brutal way of living has trickled up from the poorest strata of society and thoroughly encompassed the middle classes as well, leaving only a small elite relatively free of its grasp. Although I liked some of the Marxist stuff I was less enthralled by the Freudian analysis that Lasch employs, which perhaps merely reflects my own biases.

The book is short and straightforwardly written and is probably worthwhile for galvanizing those not already aware of our deteriorating contemporary society.

Sean Chick says

A stunning work, written by a man who defies our current definitions of conservative and liberal, which were born in the 1960s. The issues Lasch raises still plague us today because we have elevated capitalism to a religion and the baby boomers, who Lasch consistently blasts, are now in full control. If this book were written in 2012 it would still make sense.

None of this means the book is perfect. Lasch discusses obscure thinkers without describing their ideas. He is too Freudian and his afterword is dismissive towards the obvious thrust of his book: the rise of individualism, for if discussing the fallout from the decay of the family was his goal, then he failed to a degree, for that is never explicitly stated nor given a more prominent place in the text than his other points of discussion. The book seems to be discussing less a world without the family, and more so a world where the progressive and capitalist dreams were turning into iron cages. In that regard Lasch was right, and our poverty of ideas in the face of the current crisis is because of those cages we lavishly built for ourselves.

Austin Burbridge says

A bore. Reader, pass by! This farrago of ludicrous banalities could have been a good book: interesting, informative, critical. Instead, the author has squandered the opportunity — and the reader's time — with two hundred and sixty-eight dull pages of pompous, pious, neo-conservative cant. It's barber-shop talk — Sunday-school self-righteousness — gussied up in the pretentious, pseudo-academic argot of the chattering classes of New York City, circa 1979, with a liberal garnish of end notes masquerading as scholarly apparatus. The book is a fake: "All hat and no cattle!" There are no real arguments being advanced here in a coherent and logical discourse; merely a piling-on of assertion and anecdote. Its natural companion on the remainder table would be another fatuous best-seller of the era, *The Greening of America*. You'd learn more about mid-century America's culture of narcissism (and have more fun) by listening to Carly Simon sing, "You're So Vain (You Probably Think This Song Is About You)."

Thomas Fortenberry says

I would give this book five stars but there was not enough about me in it.

Nathan Duffy says

Chock full of trenchant insights about what forms and constitutes our cultural narcissism. A tad too much Freud and Marx for my taste, but even those frameworks are utilized deftly.

Kate Hoffman says

This hyper-technical book about the psychology of the current state of the Selfish Union has been really, really hard for me to get into. But I'm wading along, hopefully learning something about you, me and everyone we know.

****Update: May, 2012****

Jesus, I'm STILL not done with this book. :) But it is thoroughly fascinating, and worth the time it is taking me to fully digest what is being discussed. I often find I really have to re-read entire pages a few times for it all to sink in. I also am so intrigued by the various minutiae (like how narcissism has changed the role of sports in human culture) that I find my mind wandering off on tangents constantly, and then realize I haven't actually been reading for 20 minutes and have to start the page over yet again. :)

Jayesh says

Important read for me personally. Forced me to rethink about a lot of my beliefs. Quite surprisingly, despite being originally published in 1979, little of this thoughtful analysis of American culture has dated. It's kind of eerie, honestly, to see all the current artifacts, from Trump to MRA to identity politics.

I can understand that it can come across as an old man curmudgeonly ranting at the world and the Freudian psychobabble doesn't help. But if you ignore that [*], it's probably the best steelman for conservative principles, not that anyone seems to care much about those right now. Some parts reminded me of James Scott's description of destruction of *metis* in *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. However, it's quite dense with some contradictory parts (like for all the psychobabble, the term narcissism is primarily metaphorically used).

And the funny thing is that you are still left with the same crippling self-doubt whether anything can be done about any of it, as an individual. Also see: premium mediocre .

Some interesting highlights:

On narcissism:

...the character traits associated with pathological narcissism, which in less extreme form appear in such profusion in the every day life of our age: dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings. Nor do they discuss what might be called the secondary characteristics of narcissism: pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor.

As an aside I do recommend reading the original story of Narcissus.

On authenticity:

In eighteenth-century London or Paris, sociability did not depend on intimacy. "Strangers meeting in parks or on the street might without embarrassment speak to each other." They

shared a common fund of public signs which enabled people of unequal rank to conduct a civilized conversation and to cooperate in public projects without feeling called upon to expose their innermost secrets. The romantic cult of sincerity and authenticity tore away the masks that people once had worn in public and eroded the boundary between public and private life. As the public world came to be seen as a mirror of the self, people lost the capacity for detachment and playful encounter, which presupposes a certain distance from the self.

Others:

As John R. Seeley noted in 1959, the transfer of parental knowledge to other agencies parallels the expropriation of the worker's technical knowledge by modern management – “the taking over from the worker of the sad necessity of providing himself with the means of production.” By “helpfully” relieving the worker from “such onerous responsibilities” as the provision of his own and his children's needs, society has freed him, as Seeley wrote, “to become a solder in the army of production and a cipher in the process of decision.”

The introduction of courses in home-making, health, citizenship, and other nonacademic subjects, together with the proliferation of athletic programs and extracurricular activities, reflected the dogma that schools had to educate “the whole child”; but it also reflected the practical need to fill up the students' time and to keep them reasonably contented. Such programs spread rapidly through the public schools in the twenties and thirties, often justified by the need to make “good citizenship,” in the words of a dean of Teachers College, “a dominant aim of the American public school.”

[...]

Dimly recognizing that in many areas – precisely those that lie outside the formal curriculum – experience teaches more than books, educators then proceeded to do away with books: to import experience into the academic setting, to re-create models of learning formerly associated with the family, to encourage students to “learn by doing.” [...] Two educators wrote in 1934, without any awareness of the irony of their prescriptions:

“By bringing into the school those who are practical doers from the world... to supplement and stimulate the teaching of those whose training has been in the normal school, education can be vitalized...”

The more closely education approximated this empty ideal, however, the more effectively it discouraged ambition of any sort, except perhaps the ambition to get away from school by one expedient or another. By draining the curriculum not merely of academic but of practical content, educators deprived students of challenging work and forced them to find other means of filling time which the law nevertheless required them to spend in school [...] Though teachers and administrators deplored their students' obsession with popularity, they themselves encouraged it by giving so much attention to the need to get along with others – to master the

cooperative habits considered indispensable to industrial success.

Society no longer expects authorities to articulate a clearly reasoned, elaborately justified code of law and morality; nor does it expect the young to internalize moral standards of the community. It demands only conformity to the conventions of everyday intercourse, sanctioned by psychiatric definitions of normal behavior.

[*]: Although Lasch is guilty of taking it a lot more seriously than he should, Freud does make as a good metaphor. Consider this remark: "It is through love and work, that we exchange crippling emotional conflict for ordinary unhappiness"
